

MEDIUMS IN LITERARY SETTINGS: THE LEVERAGE OF INDIVIDUALISM IN THE MODERN NOVEL

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Abstract. Literary methodists have always been in search of new ways of expression and new experiments, so much so with reference to the modern novel of, for instance, George Santayana and Thomas Mann. The two made use of theoretical notes or marginalia in order to approve or disapprove of certain concepts and to set forth their distinct aesthetic and political philosophy well into the 20th century. The fact that these modern writers were in a constant process of changing perspectives and denouncing the infatuation of society with democracy or of realism with objectivity can be traced back to their method of bringing their private political thought into the character of a novel. Their primary concern in this effort was to put to the test the functionality of subjectivism through the stimuli mediated either by their awkward relationship with some of their colleagues in the field or with the public itself. The question remains for us today as to how these modern writers will push their inner experience into drawing back from society and creating styles which allow for one way or both ways communication.

Keywords: idealism, Santayana, Mann, public opinion

When one begins to analyse George Santayana and his method of philosophically investigating public opinion, a question comes to mind regarding his reception. A political and literary philosopher at Harvard, Santayana (1863-1952) must have been tempted to reshape his status as a modernist thinker and writer amid a society which was broadening its ties with the new liberalism manifested in philosophy, religion, and politics in the first decade of the XXth century, that is, towards the end of Santayana's academic career in the United States. In his book *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Charles Scribners', 1916), Santayana clearly delineates his philosophical tenets against German idealism. Santayana deems idealism inconsistent with the requirement that the ideas represent reality. Instead, idealism acts like a "forced method of speculation, producing more confusion than it found, and calculated chiefly to enable practical materialists to call themselves idealists and rationalists to remain theologians."¹

Faced with this new type of reasoning as structurally opposed to his Catholic upbringing, Santayana embarks an incommensurable rather than risky voyage, at his own pace. He seeks to expose the negative influence of liberal Protestantism which kept protruding into his traditional beliefs during all the years he spent in the American university:

the fear that its (idealism's) secret might be eluding to me, seeing that by blood and tradition I was perhaps handicapped in the matter, spurred me to... prolonged efforts to understand what confronted me so bewilderingly...²

¹ George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Charles Scribners' 1916), 5.

² George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Charles Scribners' 1916), 5.

Santayana was known to his contemporaries and colleagues at Harvard to manifest a sort of love-hate relationship with society and the idea of an informed, opinionated “public”. This attitude partially sprung from his conservative position among his fellow democrats at the university. It is also a very distinctive fashion rising from his moral doctrine that affects his politics and religion altogether.

Santayana was also known to have lived an almost secluded life or at least trying his best not to come across those politicians at Harvard who rejected his views.³ Resuming Santayana's critique of German idealism, he calls it a “glorified and dogged egotism... revealed to me through a thousand personal and technical evidences”⁴. This sense of pragmatism in Santayana's thinking was, we gather, derived directly from religion, and linked with his strong view on public opinion which, he argues, makes way for “corporate fanaticism”. A practical example given by Santayana here is the case of Germany during World War I, which although Germany might not have caused *per se*, was another example where it nevertheless “shared and justified prophetically that spirit of uncompromising self assertion and metaphysical conceit”.⁵ This is the same kind of self-affirmation which is otherwise known as nationalism particularly in relation with Germany.

But how well does Santayana understand the true nature of German idealism is always a revelation, and this is especially true in connection with Hegel's philosophy. Hegel is easy to follow as long as we read the primary source first, and then in due diligence react to his commentators and detractors. As for his detractors, Hegel was more than once accused to have moulded his ideas about the “phenomenology of spirit” in such a subversive way as to represent a reality different than the ideal reality.⁶ In other words, Hegel's phenomenology has become to good a friend with human reality because it worked with the same methods applied to human reason.

According to his critics, Hegel's method empowered human reality and failed to be the *Vorstellung* (representation) of the spirit. Hegel did not live out the possibility of coincidence between the inner/spiritual life and the outer/political life. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel makes a significant parallelism between the two, starting with titles like: “The True Spirit. The ethical order”, or “Spirit that is certain of itself. Morality”. This is especially true

³ See César García, “Walter Lippmann and George Santayana: A Shared Vision of Society and Public Opinion,” *The Journal of American Culture* 29.2 (June 2006): 183-190. Santayana is hereby presented against the background of Harvard's vivid social and political life in the newly created context of publicly exhorting opinions through mass-media. To Santayana, not being practically and directly involved in the event, but considering that talking about it is a matter of opinion, was from the start wrong, since the words uttered remotely from the inner self/experience are contaminated as a social “stereotype”. Thus Santayana confronts William James' philosophical pretenses and his idea of mass-power or absolute democracy, which has to be relative to the amount of people sharing them instinctually (as received from a group of political/social interests), and not rationally.

⁴ George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Charles Scribners' 1916), 7.

⁵ George Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Charles Scribners' 1916), 7.

⁶ In this sense, Santayana and others, notice well that Hegel's main concern was not for a world of the spirit as opposed to the world of matter, since in his work we can never find this assertion and partition. See, also, Malcolm Clark, “Meaning and Language in Hegel's Philosophy,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 58.60 (1960): 560-561. The materialization of the concept of spirit is a false problem in Hegel, because this is Hegel as his work reveals him.

in Hegel as he discusses these concepts in a book about laws, political institutions, and jurisprudence, thus bringing the problem of Spirit in a very material setting.

In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel remains the same character as in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in that (with this book even more so) he is not looking for symbols to represent the State or Spirit, but searches for their exact meaning at any rate. Moreover, Hegel holds that it is logically impossible to separate them into different fields. For Hegel, the state as spirit is organized in itself, but it is alive only insofar both family (Spirit) and civil society (State) are connected, and the ultimate truth of both institutions is Spirit itself, of which they are aware. Hegel concludes that the individuals' self-awareness makes for the reality of the State, and the power of the State lies in their identity.⁷ Not to put the two in the same stanza would thus be a contradiction for Hegel, because his sense of morality asserts that the universal is legitimate as long as it is judgemental and inclusivistic:

The universal moral consciousness represented by “the others” tries to unmask the hypocrisy (*Verstellung*) of the individual conscience..., to show that the universal, impersonal language of morality is both used by the conscientious person, and also used to disguise his personal contempt for that universality.⁸

Verstellung (hypocrisy) here is the opposite of *Vorstellung* with its power of representing the spiritual (individual, inner life) in the context of the universal. Returning to Santayana and his dismissal of Hegel's (German) absolute idealism, in his defence it could be said that he is maybe the only political philosopher that understood Hegel for who he was and thought. But Santayana was also a Modernist, in which capacity he despised universalists like German liberals in their political, religious, and philosophical ideas.

If in his time Hegel was considered a revolutionary thinker precisely because he admonished his conservative citizens, and it is not yet sure if he was a liberal, Santayana is a conservative thinker because his individualism urges him to oppose liberals, and it is not sure yet if he was a conservative.⁹ He never trusted public opinion and the masses enacting democracy. Instead, those who knew him closely (Lippmann, William James, Josiah Royce) noticed his particular “affair” with democracy, which at Harvard was in those times identical with the rise of mass-media and liberty of speech, public opinion or democracy.

To this newly born phenomenalism, Santayana opposed what might be called his own epiphenomenalism. Santayana's epiphenomenalism is apparently best described outside his philosophical works, such as *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906), *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916) or *Character and Opinion in the United States: with Reminiscences of William James and Josiah Royce and Academic Life in America* (1920). Considered a bestseller in 1936 after *Gone with the Wind*, his novel *The Last Puritan*, subtitled *A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*, finely explores the strata of the early XXth Century North American society, and addresses the

⁷ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25-251.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 576, paragraph 661. For an analysis of the individual and the others in Hegel, see also Kenneth R. Westphal, “Mutual Recognition and Rational Justification in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,” *Dialogue* 48 (2009): 266 (265-286).

⁹ David D. Corey, “George Santayana on Liberalism and the Spiritual Life.” *Modern Life* 45.5 (Fall 2003): 350-356.

fact of being born and living in the United States. However, Santayana the novelist announces that this novel is merely a scent of his individual experience as a Spanish-American in the late Puritan society, in the first decade of the new century. With his character Oliver Alden, born to a mentally alienated-drug abuser Peter Alden, and his wife Harriet Bumstead Alden, daughter of Nathaniel's well-off psychiatrist, Santayana creates another experimental novel defined as a generation experiment rather than a personal *Bildung*.

In *The Last Puritan*, above the everyday life and happenings of his characters, who are heroes of this world, George Santayana masterfully revisits the basics of German-American state of affairs during and after World War I. At this point one has to remember another significant presence in the novel, who is Irma Schlote, Oliver's caretaker and a great influence on him in his younger life before the war. As she is a docile German lady but otherwise hurt in her national pride when Mrs. Harriet Alden makes unpleasant remarks about her country's role in the event, Santayana takes his time to analyse on 700 pages just how private views are slowly built into a public opinion. Along with Irma, all the other main characters are experiments in this novel, and the problem of the two countries, one standing for the old European rationalism, and the other holding strong to the new English moral values face us with a sharp contrast.

The contrast turns the novel into a complicated philosophical question. Irma and Mario Van de Weyer, Oliver's Italian cousin, came to the new world (Boston, MA) as expats, precisely like Santayana who came to live here as a Spanish expatriate. Oliver, on the other hand, stands for the American Puritan descending from a Puritan lineage and he is forced into believing that his upbringing oblige him out of a distinct moral duty. Already a decision (i.e. moral principles, political and social welfare) is made for him to act according to it. Hence the philosophical question for us: is absolute idealism and things related to it (liberalism, public opinion) to be preferred to moral absolutism and its tenets (conservatism, personal duty, high principles)? Is the individual forced to consent to the will of majority, thus refuting his own will, or is he bound to act by pre-established rules?

Santayana's epiphenomenalism as this novel ascertains is neither a liberal nor a conservative social order, but deals with decision that comes before acting. Santayana trusts neither groups of interests enabling someone to govern nor the hereditary autocrats and other such absolutisms. Instead, as Garcia agrees,

Santayana makes numerous references to his lack of faith in democracy's potential as a social equalizer by extending aristocratic privileges to all citizens. For Santayana, the ideal form of government was timocracy – a government of men of merit, and a more liberal form than social democracy.¹⁰

Fortunately, literature offers more examples of this meritorious type of social and political order than we find in real life. Most of them come from long before Santayana's time, more precisely from the realist writers of mid XVIIIth century Europe. Balzac and Stendhal, for instance, trusted Napoleon the Ist as their governing model, a man who made a political career

¹⁰César García, "Walter Lippmann and George Santayana: A Shared Vision of Society and Public Opinion." *The Journal of American Culture* 29.2 (June 2006): 183-190.

for himself and was looked at in the hope that other young men could have his chance in life, if well motivated.

But Santayana was a fervent traditional Catholic, and perhaps now his attitude towards Oliver Alden and his tragic destiny as a Puritan is indeed revelatory. So much for Santayana's cultural identity with writers like Balzac and Stendhal. Balzac was above all fascinated by metaphysics, and his response to questions related to religion and Catholicism came with an observation: if anyone read his *Louis Lambert* (1832), the misfit behaviour of this genius boy's priest-teachers at College de Vendôme towards him sufficed as an answer. At his turn, Stendhal was much too infatuated with the idea of social imparity to bestow Julien Sorel a place of his own among Catholic clerics in *Red and Black*. Both writers were, to be honest, supporting the bourgeoisie against Catholicism in their homeland, precisely because this new social class encouraged new young talents to access a career, whereas Catholicism and monarchy were in sheer contrast with its democratic ideals.

In his *Marginalia*, George Santayana resume the case of the American Puritan with a heavily marked statement which says:

The common notion of the American Puritan as evasive and prudish is... totally false... Above all, he was not prudish. He was not afraid of sex..., he condemned its laxer manifestations... It was the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie that was evasive and prudish... In the founding of the West, religion played an inconspicuous and infinitesimal part – it was the economic motivation there which was paramount.¹¹

Now the impact of Santayana's words here would have been immense, hence the reason why we find them disclosed in his "marginalia". The connection between the founding social rule of bourgeoisie in the United States and a more deliberate lifestyle is stressed against the background of an adoptive culture which was heavily based on prerogatives like sexual freedom and economic ease, a perfect mix for the appearance of what Santayana calls "public opinion". As previously mentioned, the writer felt in his close entourage that in the first decade of the XXth century the new wave of democracy before the war denied all rights to those who resisted public opinion. McClay reminds us that while at Harvard, Santayana's fate as an academic was sealed due to his "independent spirit", which the public opinion/mass democracy refuted.

If Santayana could'n find a brotherhood among the XIXth century realists, we had the feeling that someone else among his fellow modernists issued very similar words regarding public opinion in his respective country. In a matter of seconds, the name and the words emerged, so that trying to not take one writer for the other wasn't easy. But first, a reminder. An expat himself from Europe in the United States, Thomas Mann (1875-1955) originated from an influential bourgeois German family, a status well reflected upon in his novel *The Buddenbrooks* (1901). His very self being pictured in the character of Hanno Buddenbrook, we figure that the author's relationship with this bourgeois mentality is twofold: in real life he enjoyed its commodities, albeit as an artist, Mann lived above it, literally an airhead. Born in

¹¹ George Santayana, *George Santayana's Marginalia. A Critical Selection*. Book I, ed. John McCormick (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 1:130-1:131.

Hansa-Lübeck, his paternal Catholic lineage first moulded his character into a *Bildung*, and he confesses in *Doctor Faustus* that his Catholic convictions never breeched his humanistic calling. As for Mann's political views in Germany before and after WW I and WW II, and his subsequent experience in the United States after the war, an explanation is needed so that his relationship with Santayana become evident. In his *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* (1918), Mann delineated the two phases of his political thought by admitting to a first stage of imperialistic ultra-conservatism. This stage was motivated by the restriction of free circulation of Germans imposed by the war, which led to the restriction or flattening of ideas. This included the religious ideas, which were suppressed by the all comprising monarchical realism of Kaiser Wilhelm II, meaning that all people in Germany were basically under the same mass thinking.¹² The question is what sort of internal change was afterwards triggered by Mann's attempt to surpass this deadlock. Looking back to this purely ideological essay¹³, Mann explains the situation created in 1914, and why the whole Germany, including the artists, was driven in the cluster of mass opinion:

We felt the revolting and unnerving sense of being delivered over to foreigners and had the disorders of domestic dissolution break upon us. The feeling had been strong in me from the beginning that here was the epochal turning-point of an age, whose profound meaning for me personally could not be denied.¹⁴

Though the political regime of the then Germany was the prevalent monarchy, it was also the bourgeoisie that supported the Kaiser's social reforms, thus redirecting people's complaints towards the unsupportive nobility. Mann encountered this preliminary form of German democracy as a tumultuous event among the masses, and here's how he remembers it in *Betrachtungen* in 1918, at a reasonable distance in time after the initial impact:

I met the New Passion then, as democracy, as political Enlightenment and humanitarianism of happiness. I understood its efforts to be the politicization of everything ethos; its aggressiveness and doctrinary intolerance consisted – I experienced them personally – in its denial and slander of every nonpolitical ethos. “Mankind” and “humanitarian internationalism”; “reason and virtue” as the radical republic; intellect as a thing between the Jacobin club and Freemasonry; art as social literature and maliciously seductive rhetoric in the service of social “desirability”: here we have the New Passion in its purest political form as I saw it close up.¹⁵

¹² As, for instance, supported by Adolf von Harnack. See Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1990), 22. Various ideas and quotations are here taken from my study, Ramona Simuț, *Elements of Cultural Continuity in Modern German Literature. A Study of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Mann* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011).

¹³ The title reminds us of Nietzsche, characterized as “the last apolitical German”. The content of Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* is an image of the erosion of Western civilization and expresses the combination between music and poetry under the auspices of the creative genius.

¹⁴ Thomas Mann, *A Sketch of My Life*, trans. H. T. Lower-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 51-52.

¹⁵ Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen. Vorrede* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2001), 50. See Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, trans. by Walter D. Morris (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1983), 16.

From this point forth, i.e. throughout Mann's mature life in the United States as an expatriate writer and political ideologist, his and Santayana's paths are so similar it is almost nonsensical to insist on their common ideas about democracy. Except, perhaps, this last excerpt from Mann's *The Genesis of a Novel (Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus. Roman eines Romans)*: „I recall an evening with Leonhard Frank... Socialist in his political beliefs..., he was at the same time filled with a new feeling for Germany and its indivisibility. Given the tenacity with which Hitler's troops were still fighting, this was a patriotism that seemed curiously premature. Yet it was beginning to develop among the German exiles... His emotional involvement with Faustus was welcome to me but at the same time worried me. I could not help taking it as a warning—against the danger of my novel's doing its part in creating a new German myth, flattering the Germans with their “demonism”¹⁶

Interestingly enough, Mann is aware that this demonism he refers to did not begin with Hitler as the demonic other. On the contrary, we learn, German demonism is not related to Nazi politics in any way whatsoever. Somewhere hidden in their national past, the Germans, of whom Hitler was but an alien, found anew in America a type of democracy that they proposed to import into their homeland out of melancholy. Now, we should not be mistaken, and think that Mann was against all types of democracy. While still in Germany, he was surely fond of the democratic regime of chancellor Gustav Stresemann, who in 1923 employed several illustrious men to implement social reforms. But, like Santayana noticed before, the masses are not in favor of a few meritorious *luminati* selected for special tasks. While Mann might have desired such a government, it did not last for more than a decade, that is until the Germans voted for national socialism with its everlastingly accompanying idealism.

Mann touches the issue of writing at this very point, confessing that when he writes, he is innocent, he is himself. He defends the verticality of the man of culture in his relationship with society and politics lest he should let his work open to polemics. In this context, the appeal of his works to the public was never a conscious act in the sense of a social pact but, on the contrary, it had an origin as distinctive as the artist himself.¹⁷ The type of relationship which is being build between the creator (as a writer who is keenly aware of social changes) and the public (which is affected by these changes) is individualistic and far from populist, since the writer has, as Mann says, a „sign of his brow”. To conclude this idea, perhaps the most striking message that both Santayana and Mann's work conveys for their generation, as far as idealism and the influential public are concerned, cannot be uttered in the language of those masses. Santayana, to be sure, always wanted to „say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible,”¹⁸ while Mann chose for himself the same position: “Switzerland is the country in which the most gloriously [non-] German things are said in German. This is why I love it.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Thomas Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel*, trans. Clara Winston (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), 48.

¹⁷ The most significant parts of the correspondence between Mann and Hesse as well as between Mann and his brother Heinrich were produced against the background of the accusations concerning the appeal to the public as an intentional act. Excerpts from Ramona Simuț, *Elements of Cultural Continuity in Modern German Literature*, chapter III.2.

¹⁸ Wilfred M. McClay, „Remembering Santayana,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 25.3 (Summer 2001): 48-63.

¹⁹ Thomas Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel*, trans. Clara Winston (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), 71.

The sense of a democracy based on practical idealism is, in Santayana's and Mann's political and fictional works the fundamental cultural and religious issue of the modern nation, because it lacks inner life, imagination, beliefs in another possible existence, facts of life which cannot be otherwise expressed in words.

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